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ON PAGE D-1

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For Sihanouk, a Nimble About-Face

By Joy Billington
Washington Star Staff Writer

Ten years ago, he was bitterly antagonistic to the United States — by no means an unusual state of affairs for Norodom Sihanouk. Beginning with John Foster Dulles and ending with Henry Kissinger, the former Cambodian head of state always had rocky relations with Washington.

In 1970, from exile in Peking, his bitterness reached a low with his book "My War With the CIA," in which he squarely blamed the United States for engineering the Lon Nol rightist coup that deposed him earlier that year.

But times have changed. Now, on a win-friends-and-influence-people visit to Washington, Sihanouk is recanting madly. In fact, he has made a 180-degree turn, which even he recognizes as bizarre.

Now, in a remarkable *volta face*, he says: "I am almost 60. When I was young, I liked to be leftist. Now I'm getting old, I feel myself very confortable being rightist. And we Cambodians need the U.S. like human beings need oxygen."

In an interview and at a Washington Press Club lunch yesterday, the 58-year-old former king and political leader of Cambodia explained that he now perceives the United States as a champion of freedom and seeks its support for a plan to establish a new U.N.-sponsored plan to re-establish his wartorn and starving nation as the kind of neutralist state he once fought so hard to maintain.

Still quixotic, still strident in voice with the passions of a man with a cause, still inclined to undermine his arguments with a giggle of amusement at the sound of Sihanouk being serious, he speaks of the past and, with appealing frankness, acknowledges past mistakes.

His old enemy John Foster Dulles, he remembers, may have despised Sihanouk's neutralism, but at least he was a "man of conscience, a man with moral convictions."

One daughter is a refugee living in California.

In years past, his remarkably beautiful children sometimes traveled in Southeast Asia. In 1960, five princes and princesses represented Cambodia at the first Southeast Asian Cultural Festival, performing the stylized movements of the classic dance with exquisite grace in their golden costumes, as though they had sprung to life straight out of the carvings at Ankor Wat.

Princess Bopha Devi, the eldest daughter, was then out of favor with her father — who in his youth had not exactly ignored the opposite sex himself — because she had taken a new lover. Laughingly he recalled it Thursday. "Yes, she was having too many romances." Today Bopha Devi lives in Paris, he says.

Those "golden days" when Sihanouk played his clever games against the big powers from his palace in Phnom Penh are long over. But the big game is still on for Sihanouk, and the possibilities of returning to Cambodia still viable. Consequently, he stays close, living with his wife Princess Monique, his piano and his saxophone in a foreign palace in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, at the invitation of his friend Kim Il Sung.

So comes Sihanouk's recantation and his bid for U.S. support. He plans to stay in the country for several weeks. On Wednesday, he is scheduled to see Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. In April he returns to North Korea, after a visit to Peking.

"Mr. John Foster Dulles was right," he said yesterday. "He told me we had to choose. Now, today, I say for the sake of my people, that we must choose the free world."

By contrast, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the team who bombed Viet Cong "sanctuaries" in Cambodia in an effort to win the Vietnam war, and in Sihanouk's mind brought about the coup that deposed him, were "machiavellian."

Then, with that characteristic giggle, he adds, "But I was also. I liked to make the maneuvers."

That, in a nutshell, says everything about Sihanouk. He always liked to make maneuvers. In fact, he made one or two too many.

After reigning as king from 1941 to 1955 — (until 1953 he was a figurehead ruler under French colonial control) — Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his parents and became the country's political leader.

He spent the next 15 years playing off the big powers one against another, ducking and weaving and kicking like a Cambodian boxer, commanding his government officials to take off their shirts and ties and dig ditches so they could feel one with the peasantry, writing songs and poetry, dancing, fathering 13 children by several ladies.

And, in a day when neutralism was still a dirty word to Americans, gradually leaning towards the Chinese and the Soviets, who took a longer view of his neutralism than did Washington.

"I was anti-American in the past, because there was a misunderstanding. Mr. John Foster Dulles did not appreciate my neutralism," he says. "He believed neutralism meant pro-communism. And there were many plots organized against me, and I believed that behind the plots was the CIA."

What brought about his dramatic change of heart, he insists, were his experiences from 1975 on, when the communist Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot defeated the rightist Lon Nol regime. Returning from a five-year exile in Peking, Sihanouk became the new regime's nominal head of state, a position he resigned a year later "because I didn't want to be held responsible for their crimes," as he explained last year in New York when Peking persuaded him to speak for the Pol Pot regime at the United Nations.

There, in January last year, after a melodrama when "the prisoner of the Waldorf" escaped — (with the help of U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Andrew Young and four State Department security men) — from the Khmer Rouge guards who were checking every visitor, Sihanouk was admitted in exhaustion to a New York hospital.

On this visit, in contrast, Sihanouk comes not from Peking but from exile with his other friends, the North Koreans. And this time he is free to try his persuasive skills on anyone who will listen.

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"If I say now that I love the United States, it is not opportunism," he said yesterday, winning over his Washington Press Club audience with his confessions. "I do not need your money. I do not need a palace here. But after 1975, I got a bitter experience of the Khmer Rouge. I myself lost three daughters, two sons and 15 grandchildren, killed by the Khmer Rouge. So I see clearly I was wrong because without the U.S. our world could become an immense Auschwitz. What I called U.S. imperialism was not imperialism. I confess I was wrong. Because the imperialism is from Moscow and Hanoi and the Khmer Rouge."

He expresses the desire to lead an army of liberation into Cambodia to free his country. But typically, the plan changes slightly in 24 hours. On Thursday he talks about trying to persuade the U.S. to put some pressure on Thailand, whose terrain he would have to traverse if his invasion plan took place, to agree to the idea.

But by yesterday, he is sliding away a little. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke had advised him at an afternoon meeting Thursday, he says, to try for the good offices of Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to obtain a visa to visit Cambodian refugees in Thailand. If U.S. officials are shying away from helping with a Thai visa, the idea of support for a Sihanouk army plodding through Thailand to invade Cambodia looks even less likely.

But his idea is still viable in Sihanouk's mind. "I have 600 capable officers in France and 700 more in the U.S. who all want to accompany me into battle," he says. "Troops? That is no problem. Both inside Cambodia and in the Thai camps we have many who would fight the Vietnamese aggressors. Despite our weakness, morally we are strong and very patriotic."

China, he admits, is not supporting his idea. "In 1975 China helped us [the Khmer Rouge] financially and militarily. China is the only one that could provide such aid. Right now the Chinese think the Khmer Rouge are the only force capable of resisting the Vietnamese. But I think that sooner or later they will support me."

He does not expect to beat the Vietnamese, he adds, but to draw attention to Cambodia's need for U.N.-supervised democratic elections. "I tell the Chinese that it is more realistic to have a neutral Sihanoukian Cambodia, a non-communist Cambodia that is their ally than a 'Democratic Kampuchea' that is not democratic."

But he will not ask the U.S. to support the idea. "I do not want to embarrass the U.S.," he says, almost hanging his head at the very idea, as though he were acting the part of a schoolboy in a play. "I do not dare to ask for U.S. aid . . ."

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Among the millions of Cambodians who have been killed or starved in the past decade — and Sihanouk's figure is a reduction from 7 million to 4 million — he lost three sons, two daughters and 15 grandchildren "killed by the Khmer Rouge." Of his 13 children, some have survived and live in France.